

Many years ago, a young man called me for an emergency appointment. When he arrived, he was in a physical, emotional, and spiritual crisis. The first thing that I noticed was that his hand was bleeding. I seriously thought he had been in a barroom fight!

As it turned out, he *had* been in a fight--an ongoing fight with his computer-and he was losing. Over the course of time, he had engaged in what I'm going to cryptically call, "the dark side of the internet." In time, it had overwhelmed him--his relationships, his work, even his relationship with God. He was flat out addicted. And he's not alone.

The bleeding hand stemmed from despair. After another lurid Internet session, he broke his laptop in two in frustration and threw it against a wall, cutting his hand in the process. He was embarrassed and ashamed. Suicide seemed a real possibility.

Through counseling, serious prayer and a 12-step recovery group, this man is healthy and happy now but also vigilant against the dark side of the Internet. I'd like to say that this is a rare story. The reality is, as a priest-confessor, minus the violence against the

computer, I hear this story *multiple* times *each* time I hear confessions. It's an epidemic and as your pastor, I want to talk about.

This "material" is defined as anything that leads a person to *use* others for pleasure that is devoid of love, intimacy and relationship--that's pictures and movies as well as reading like the recent book, *50 Shades of Gray*. In all these circumstances, the church reminds us that it is not ok to use people.

Most importantly, use of these materials sends the wrong message about the beautiful God-given gift of human sexuality. It trains us to think of people in terms how we can *use* them to get what we want, instead of how we can love people. Interestingly, St. John Paul II said that the opposite of love is not hate. It's using people.

How did we get here? There's been "dark side material" for centuries. A guide once showed a Catholic tour group that I was leading a wall of "pictures" in the volcanically-destroyed city of

Pompeii dating back to the 7th century BC. Uh...Thanks? I thought...

But psychologist Dr. Peter Kleponis talks about a 70-year *slippery slope of acceptance* that started with 1940s wartime “pin ups.” It didn’t end there. In the 1950, “men’s magazines” were marketed under the guise of “men’s lifestyle.” In the 1960s, those magazines become more lurid in the context of the sexual revolution along with widely available and accepted birth control that reduced human sexuality to an instrument of pleasure.

In the 1970s, we accepted the lurid nature of late night cable TV, followed by the 1980s VCR and the Internet in 90s. By the 2,000s, our “appetites” were mobile--being served through cell phones and Wi-Fi. And in the 2010s, we accept the dark side of social media--chat rooms, webcams, and explicit texting. One wonders, what’s next?

This evolution has made “dark side material,” **affordable**--its free, **accessible**--one click away, **anonymous**--in the privacy of our homes, **accepted** as “adult entertainment” and **aggressively**

unhealthy. Affecting the brain chemically, there is instant gratification that releases dopamine and serotonin. Our brains want to return to it when there is a *triggering emotion*--happiness, sadness, loneliness, anger, boredom, frustration and so on. It is the same reaction that the brain has when a person is addicted to drugs or alcohol.

Let's be clear--marketers know what they're doing. They know how to get people to come back for more. They know how to hook people, just as the drug dealer knows how to enslave users of heroine and other drugs. It is, without a doubt, demonic. And the last response a struggling person needs is a shaming comment like, "You're a pervert."

All this is a far cry from what St. Paul talks about in today's second reading--that Christ will be magnified *in Paul's body*. He knew of the dignity of the human body through Jesus' Ascension when Jesus took his human body with him to heaven making it a part of our Trinitarian God. Yes...God made the human body--holy and good.

The thing is, when we turn to the “dark side,” it really isn’t what we want. Afterward, there is shame, frustration, and loneliness as we create a hidden, segmented, sinful part of our lives. We become enslaved when God created us to be free!

What we want is not exclusively in the realm of the physical. It’s relational, emotional, and spiritual. St. John Paul II also said that in the end, this material doesn’t reveal *enough* about the human person. It doesn’t reveal dignity and the beauty of the human person that longs to be loved and to love.

Lets be clear. I am not an addictions counselor. I am a concerned pastor who loves his sheep. I want solutions. I found a Catholic Website *Integrity Restored* that provided suggestions.

The first is honesty. Admit that the dark side of the Internet is a problem in your life if it is. Most importantly, through thoughtful reflection, when you have fallen into sin, determine what emotion triggered it. Addictive behavior of any kind is self-medication. Somehow, we are hurting and we are looking for ways to “check out” when we engage in addictive behaviors like

the dark side of the Internet. If this is you, get to counseling and be at peace with yourself and your past.

Take steps to protect yourself **and your family** by filtering and putting controls on technology. Researchers suggest that first exposure in the U.S. is to children between 8-11 years old--that's late grade school or jr high. This tells us that **unfiltered** Internet access equals exposure to the dark side. Bring your technology--TVs, computers, cell phones and tablets to the family room, not in private places where temptation is greater.

If you are struggling, bring the problem into the light. Create support and accountability through carefully chosen friends or accountability partners. Join a 12-step group. Sobriety is not accomplished in isolation. 64% of U.S. men admit to going to the *dark side of the Internet* at least monthly and 30% of women say they're addicted. We need one another.

Having healthy family discussions about true and authentic intimacy is critical. When I do marriage preparation, anecdotally, upwards of 95% of engaged persons report that they NEVER had a

conversation with their parents about human sexuality. Parents, how can this be? Will it be awkward? Possibly... But if I can give this homily 7 times this weekend, you can talk to your families and those you care about!

If you are struggling, address your Spiritual life. We should ALL be praying for the purity of our culture. Know that you have a loving Father and that Jesus died for you and your “hidden sins.” We have been blessed with the Sacramental life that offers grace to overcome the darkness. As St. Paul assures us “*Where sin increases, grace abounds all the more.*” Come to confession more and go to daily mass. Take comfort that in so many ways science is finally catching up with the deepest truths about the human person that the Church has always proclaimed!

Whether you are struggling or not, live a life of virtue, service and integrity. Become the person God calls you to be. It is estimated that 4.6 billion hours is wasted each year in the darkness of the Internet. What is not being done that should be? What acts

of charity and love are waiting to be done that can provide true fulfillment and happiness in your life?

And finally, educate yourself about the dangers of the “dark side of the Internet.” There are books, CDs, podcasts, and websites that will lead you to truth and peace. **In addition, I’m asking you to join us tomorrow night at 7:00 in the church for a presentation sponsored by our Gospel of Life Committee called, “Fight the New Drug.”** The program is geared to high school students and above. It is a nationally organization that seeks to promote an alternative to this scourge.

Writer Matt Fradd once wrote that, *We’ve reached a tipping point...that everyone either has been negatively impacted or loves somebody who has... so something has to change--for you, your spouse, your children, your grandchildren and your friends.* In a pastoral letter to his people, Bishop Paul Loverde of the Diocese of Arlington also said that, *“No person living in our culture today can separate himself or herself from this scourge...even those who do not participate.”* It is our hope that our prayerful effort in this

matter will also make us part of the solution--a solution of light,
hope and authentic love.